Assassinations Panel Misses Another Payday In New Spending Snag

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The staff of the rudderless House Assassinations Committee missed another payday this week in a new snafu over the committee's spending limits.

House Administration Committee chairman Frank Thompson Jr. (D-N.J.) told members of the Assassinations Committee staff at a meeting Monday that he would not approve any paychecks for them until they shaved their total spending for February to the lawful limit of $84,000.

This would mean a cut of a total of some $3,000 in salaries on top of the voluntary pay reductions that many of the committee's 73 staff members took for January and were prepared to swallow again for February.

The $3,000 accommodation, however, would normally require the signature of Assassinations Committee Chairman Henry B. Gonzalez (D-Tex.), who has been bedridden with the flu in San Antonio for the past week and a half.

The Assassinations Committee's chief counsel, Richard A. Sprague, reportedly suggested an authorization signed by a majority of the committee instead of Gonzalez, but a spokesman for Thompson said that the New Jersey Democrat was reluctant to endorse that approach.

Meanwhile Monday, which was the monthly payday for the rest of the House, slipped away without any paychecks for the Assassinations Committee staff, the second month in a row they have been kept waiting. A committee majority has reportedly signed the letter Sprague suggested, but it had not yet been transmitted to the Administration Committee at the close of business yesterday.

The question of whether Sprague will be paid is another issue. Gonzalez has insisted he be dismissed for insubordination and ordered Sprague's name stricken from the staff payroll list that was sent to the Administration Committee last Thursday.

Facing extinction by March 31 unless it can win a new charter from the House, the strife-torn committee met privately, and inconclusively, with Sprague and other top staffers yesterday afternoon in the offices of Rep. Richardson Preyer (D-N.C.).

Preyer said they decided not to act on a suggestion that they formally petition Gonzalez to call a meeting "because we don't want it to appear that we're trying to embarrass the chairman."

A Gonzalez aide said that Gonzalez was feeling much better yesterday and hoped to be back in Washington next Monday. Preyer said he thought the rest of the committee could wait until then in an effort to resolve the controversy.